



SUCCESS STORY

Sharing Religions and a Community

Program uses trips and fun events to foster religious understanding



Photo: USAID

Through fun games, interaction and education, children in the Bulgarian town of Momchilgrad learn about each other's cultural identity.

Field trips to local historic and religious sites, like the 12th-century BC Tatul Temple and Renaissance churches in the town of Zlatograd, are exciting ways for youth in the “Beyond Difference” project to gain appreciation of diverse traditions.

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Youth from the small Bulgarian town of Momchilgrad participating in the “Beyond Difference” project are shy but proud when they say they know more about other religions than their fellow students or even their parents. Conceived by a staff member of a local NGO, “Beyond Difference” aims to gather an ethnically diverse group of students among Momchilgrad’s Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma populations, and help them value the diversity of their community and broader society.

The students learn about the history and traditions of the area’s dominant Christian and Muslim religions, as well as other religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. The program also includes site visits to historic places in the surrounding Rhodope Mountain region.

Some students say their favorite parts of the project are learning how children of different religions celebrate their festivals, and having the opportunity to experience new foods and songs. Their parents are also involved in the project and benefit from the specialized instruction their children are receiving.

Girls from a Muslim high school in a neighboring village work as volunteers with the project. For the girls, this provides a unique opportunity to interact with non-Muslim children. For some of the children in the project, the Muslim girls’ participation provided them their first exposure to young women practicing a more conservative form of Islam and wearing traditional headscarves.

The project is one of many micro-projects in social services improvement, educational advancement and local economic development in mixed ethnic communities that USAID has implemented through its local partners.